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WILLIAM MONTGOMERIE

William Macmath and the Scott Ballad Manuscripts

The student of Francis James Child's volumes *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* may have noticed frequent references to the help given to the editor by William Macmath. It would be a pity if William Macmath continued to be remembered only in the few sentences scattered through Child's five volumes, especially as a closer examination of the evidence shows that Professor Child could not have brought his impressive collection of British ballads to its high state of completeness without the assistance of William Macmath.

Professor Child's fumbling when he tried to tap the wealth of Aberdeen oral tradition is revealed by a very superficial examination of the Alexander Keith's *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Airs*. In a sense, the hundred-odd manuscript notebooks of Gavin Greig, from which Keith extracted the ballads may be seen in Child's work as a series of gaps. The mass of material supplied by William Macmath might also have been gaps in that work.

As a Scot visiting Cecil Sharpe House in London, I have often been reminded of Scottish neglect of Gavin Greig who is at least equally important. The following notes are a preliminary attempt to bring another neglected Scot into greater prominence. He is not as important as Gavin Greig but his present almost complete obscurity is due largely to the fact that he was a Scot whose countrymen have not yet discovered him.

The few facts about William Macmath's uneventful life were published in *William Macmath (1844-1922) A Biographical Sketch* by Frank Miller (Dalbeattie: Thomas Fraser, 1924).

William Macmath was born in Brighton, his father being Alexander Macmath, a native of the Galloway parish of Parton. In 1867, William was employed in the office of Messrs. W. and J. Cook W. S., 61 North Castle Street, Edinburgh; then in the office of Messrs. Dundas and Wilson, 16 St. Andrew Square for fifty years.

On 14th December 1874 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and was one of the original members of the Edin-

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burgh Bibliographical Society. He began his correspondence with Professor Child in the Spring of 1873 and continued it till Child's death in September 1869. It is from Macmath's complete record of that correspondence that the following extracts have been copied.

Professor Child and William Macmath met only once, during Child's visit to Edinburgh in August 1873.

William Macmath, from his office at 16 St. Andrew Square, Edinburgh, wrote to F. J. Furnivall on 25th April 1877. He asked the editor of the Percy Manuscript to insert the following notice "in one of the literary journals of Saturday":

Death of Mr. Geo. R. Kinloch

. . . George Ritchie Kinloch died at his residence, West Coates Villa, Edinburgh, on Sunday last, in his eightieth year, having survived by half a century the publication of his *Ancient Scottish Ballads*, . . . The strong point of Mr. Kinloch's excellence as an editor lay in his scrupulous fidelity, and in this respect he belonged emphatically to the school of Herd, Ritson and Motherwell, as opposed to that of Ramsay, Percy, Scott, Jamieson, and Buchan.

This notice was printed in the *Edinburgh Evening News* of Saturday, April 28, 1877.

In his letter Macmath added a significant statement about Scott:

The views expressed are not my own alone, but are these which I know to be held by Professor Child. Even he, however, does not yet know the full extent to which Sir Walter Scott was a sinner in the matter of ballad editing. Nothing but my reluctance to anticipate the Professor's book prevents me from exposing Scott. How necessary that we should value the men, like Kinloch, who were faithful among the faithless found.

Three years later, on 9th February 1880, Macmath repeated this charge to Professor Child:

I cannot speak with any confidence as to Jamieson's treatment of Mss., but for Scott's fidelity I would not give twopence. From what I have seen in Glenriddell's case (to which I will immediately advert) I know he made the most paltry alterations, "from tradition", . . . that he plundered one Ballad for the sake of another, that he failed in many cases to acknowledge his authority at all, and that, in short, he did almost everything which a Ballad Editor, as his duties are now understood, ought not to have done. To deal with Scott's Ballads without Mrs. Brown's Mss. would not be unlike dealing with Percy without the Folio . . .

But even if we should fail to get Mrs Brown, we have enough, I am thankful to say, in Glenriddell, upon which to frame an indictment against Sir Walter . . . I doubt if we will ever get a better example of Scott's style of treatment than in the Ballad which he has called (I do not say improperly, but "trusty Glenriddell" does not venture on a name himself) "Lord Maxwell's Goodnight", and which, so far as I know, does not exist elsewhere. I send a copy of eight lines, which is a fair enough sample. I told Mr. Furnivall long

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ago that nothing but my unwillingness to anticipate your edition prevented me from exposing Scott, and I think the printing of this little poem alone might make a reputation for a man! . . .

Before leaving Sir Walter I may say it seems to me worthy of your serious consideration whether you have got all the material from Abbotsford which you ought to have. . . . Every day I live I am more and more impressed with the great responsibility resting upon those who take part in the discussion of Ballad authenticity, and the danger of proceeding without clear and sufficient evidence. . . .

Ten years later, evidence begins to appear in Macmath's correspondence that he was laying siege to Abbotsford. Robert B. Armstrong wrote him that he had not heard again from Father Forbes-Leith and concluded that there was nothing to be found at Abbotsford.

This gave Macmath his opportunity. On 28th January 1890 he wrote directly to the Revd. W. Forbes-Leith, S. J., reminding him that he had consented to look through the Abbotsford Library for a copy of the Ballad of "Jamie Telfar". It had been for some years, for Macmath, a matter of great regret that Professor Child had not been in a position to use the texts of the Ballads collected by Sir Walter Scott, as taken direct from the original Mss. In the letter he lists the famous Scottish collectors already used by Child, tells him that David Laing, a number of years before, had applied to the Abbotsford Trustees on the Professor's behalf and that, at a later date, Thomas Carlyle had written to Mr. Maxwell Scott on the subject.

The reply on both occasions had been that no Ballads in Ms could be found.

It did not seem to me fitting that I should attempt to rush in where such eminent names had failed. But though silent, I have remained unconvinced and dissatisfied. Though the Abbotsford Library may contain no Ballads in Ms bound up together *as such*, the Ballads which Sir Walter collected in Ms must, I think, still be in existence, and are probably bound up with or form part of his correspondence.

In a further letter (4th February 1890) Macmath tells the Rev. Forbes-Leith that Mr. Laing had obtained from Abbotsford certain Ballads from a Ms Miscellany in Abbotsford, "Scottish Songs," which had been shown at the Scott Centenary Exhibition. They were of small value, being only "copies from the versions of Mrs. Brown of Falkland, altered and interpolated."

If it would further the Ballad cause, Macmath was willing to make a special journey to Abbotsford and arrange to take his annual holiday in the neighbourhood, copying manuscripts if necessary.

Next day (5th Feb.) Macmath wrote to Child, beginning his letter, "Abbotsford has been carried, as I believe." Forbes-Leith had just called

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on him and the two men were to manage the matter between them. Macmath sends Father Forbes-Leith a list of a few Ballads, "Hobbie Noble," "Jamie Telfer" etc. from the next part of Child's collection. By the beginning of June, Macmath is suggesting the first week in July as the date most convenient. Can he get into Abbotsford then to look for ballads? There are no obstacles, but Forbes-Leith is not sure if he can be at home at that time. It is probably for that reason that the date proposed for Macmath's visit to Abbotsford is postponed to 7th July.

All I shall require will be a corner to write in, and the necessary volumes. Those I *know* of at present are (1) the volumes containing Sir Walter's correspondence. (2) the 6 small vols of stall ballads we spoke of. (3) the Bell stall ballads. (4) the Ms Vol "Scottish Songs".

I intend to lodge at Darnick or Gattenside if I can.

It is evident, from the correspondence between Macmath and Father Forbes-Leith, that Mrs. Maxwell Scott did not wish Sir Walter Scott's correspondence to be seen by everybody, so Macmath promises not to note anything not relating to ballads.

Macmath arrived in Melrose on 7th July, on a train from Edinburgh that arrived at 10:41. From the station he walked to Abbotsford. Three days later, he was already sending copies of Sir Walter Scott's ballads to Professor Child, addressing his letter from The Library, Abbotsford.

I have seen enough to enable me to report that the expedition is a great success,—how great I cannot yet say, as the Reverend Father is producing the chief treasures by degrees from some repository in the private part of the mansion, which no ordinary mortal is allowed to enter.

A week afterwards, he had already examined volume one of the Letters and much of the first Volume of ballads. He was able to sum up his first impressions:

If the second volume is as rich in material as the one I have, the Abbotsford—so far from being nowhere among Collections—will take a first place, and even what I have already seen will place it pretty high.

Macmath completed his first visit to Abbotsford on the 6th of August. In a letter to Child, five weeks later, Macmath asks him to dismiss from his mind the idea that there had been anything of martyrdom in going to Abbotsford in holiday time. He had regarded the omission of Abbotsford from among the sources of material in Child's book as a very grave reproach and scandal, which he is only too glad to be able at length to wipe out. It was at Macmath's own request that there is no mention in Child's *Ballads* of Macmath's sacrifice of his summer holiday to work in the Abbotsford library. He will have to return to Abbotsford, for several reasons. One of these is that Father Forbes-Leith lives miles

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away, at Selkirk, and has work of his own to attend to. Another difficulty is described in this same letter:

For instance, one small bookcase in the Library, which contains Ballads, can only be opened by the use of a screw driver! No wonder, therefore, that David Laing and Thomas Carlyle could do nothing. Writing letters is of no avail. Personal presence is required, to sit down before the place, and pointing say in effect, but more politely, "I must have that book out, please get the screw driver, as I cant go away without seeing the volume."

It is necessary at this point to quote a few lines from the same letter to clarify the business relations between Professor Child and his Scottish collaborator:

As to money, the fair thing is to charge you the excess over what I would have been spending in ordinary course, and if you send £2 more than you have sent already, that will be enough. I had to make one or two presents, not in current coin of the realm, and for them you can send me a book or two when opportunity offers. I should like to have your volume of Religious Poetry and your Ballads for Schools.

In the following year (1891) Macmath returned to Abbotsford on the 27th of July. As before he made his arrangements through Father Forbes-Leith:

I should like to have the volume called 'Scotch Ballad' from the private part of the Mansion, and to continue my examination of the 'Letters', beginning with Volume IV.

On 25th August he wrote Forbes-Leith from Edinburgh:

I returned from Melrose this afternoon, having done very well at Abbotsford.

I can hardly say at present whether or not I still have to claim your indulgence on a future occasion. I have secured all the important ballads I have found, and while I think there ought to be others, I am unable to point out their whereabouts.

In his report to Child (26th September 1891) Macmath is not satisfied that they have got all the Ballads in Abbotsford.

You speak of "their" duty in telling "us" about Ballads. The position now is just the reverse,—we have to tell them. We have all that I can point out in the shelves, but the state of things at Abbotsford render it impossible for me to get, or indeed to ask, full "rummaging" powers. At the time of the year I can go, the public part of the house is held by the tourists and the private part by the tenants, and I have to do the best I can among them.

He had been unable to find "North Country Ballads" in Ms., and therefore left it an open question whether he was to be back in Abbotsford or no. He had not closed the door on himself. Father Forbes-Leith had spoken of a small volume containing the songs which were sung in Sir Walter's family, but had no idea where it was. Macmath had expected

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to find something of the kind from what Lockhart said in his edition of the Minstrelsy as to the tunes. He concludes:

As to Abbotsford expenses,—if you can afford it, I would be all the better of the same as last year £7. This in full, however,—nothing extra for postage.

Macmath returned to Abbotsford at the end of July 1892 to examine the manuscript "North Country Ballads" which proved to be substantially the pieces printed in Maidment's *North Country Garland*. Some of them varied considerably from the printed form. Apart from three other unimportant volumes, there now remained the red morocco volume, described by Father Forbes-Leith as containing the pieces that used to be sung in Sir Walter's family circle. Mrs. Maxwell Scott was at Chiefswood on the estate and Macmath hung about thinking he might meet her.

Ultimately he wrote to Father Forbes-Leith about the red morocco volume. He got the informal answer that the family did not wish that volume published.

Macmath tried to find the date when the folio manuscript volume "Scotch Ballads, Materials for Border Minstrelsy" was put together. He wrote David Douglas who informed him that David Laing had something to do with the arrangement and also Alexr Brock, Bookbinders of the North Bridge, Edinburgh. Macmath's information from them was that all the old books were packed in a cellar and it might be some time before they could send him the information he desired. No further correspondence is recorded. Macmath's expenses for this third Abbotsford expedition were £3.

After his outbursts about Scott in 1877 and 1880, Macmath did not repeat his opinion of Scott as a ballad editor. There is no evidence that he altered his opinion. The evidence is now on record in the pages of Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. The literary critic will probably continue justifying Scott for "improving" our traditional ballads and making poems out of them. The true balladist will agree with every word of Macmath's criticism.

BROUGHTY FERRY, ANGUS